Madonna and Child: Universal Icon of Christmas

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Few images have such international recognition as the Madonna and Child —the hallmark icon of Christmas. For Christians, this image represents the coming of the promise of God foretold in the Old Testament; the unconditional love of God for His children; and the sorrow that must ultimately come to seal the covenant and fulfill the promise. All of these feelings can be seen in the diverse depictions of the Madonna and Child. As Christianity advanced throughout the world with its message of love, salvation, and rebirth, new converts adopted both the message and the images of Christmas. One can see the transformation of the images to include new cultures, styles, and ethnicities.

Christmas philately is replete with examples of the Madonna and Child as it is one of the most popular images for stamps, cachets and even pictorial cancels used at Christmas time. Throughout history, great artists like Raphael, DaVinci, Michangelo, Botticelli, Rubens and many others have tried to capture the intense feelings represented by the Madonna and Child. Christmas stamp issues are often derived from different Madonna and Child paintings of these old masters. Since 1966, the United States Postal Service has featured many of these on their series of Madonna and Child Christmas Issues. Other countries' Christmas Issues feature more recent artists whose work reflects newer styles and cultural influences. Some issues feature children's renderings of the Madonna and Child while others show children in depictions of the Madonna and Child. Not limited to paintings, the Madonna and Child images appearing on philatelic material are often derived from stained glass, woven textiles, marble sculptures, wood carvings, and other three dimensional art forms.

In 2005, the Royal Mail chose the Madonna and Child for its Christmas Issue. Six images were selected representing different areas of the world. Pastor Wilmer Bloy has presented an overview of this issue in the Jan./Feb. 2006 issue of the Yule Log. He notes very interesting conflicts preceding and following the release of these stamps. This review of the 2005 Royal Mail Christmas issue will emphasize the diversity of artistic interpretation of this very important Christmas icon. It also is used as an entrée into different representations of the Madonna and Child on other worldwide philatelic material.

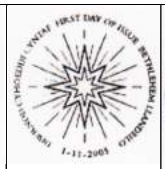
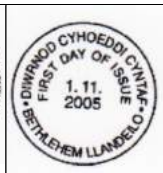
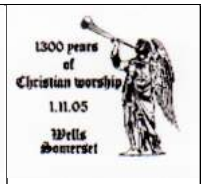
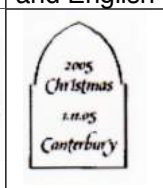
2005 Royal Mail Christmas Issue

The Stamps. This issue was designed by Berlin-based artist and Anglican priest, Irene von Treskow. She selected images from artists representing six different regions of the world to show that Christ was born for everyone. The issue was produced as individual stamps and as a minisheet (figure on p. 1). The 2nd Class stamp entitled Black Madonna and Child was from an unknown Haitian artist. The two figures are shown in richly colored clothes. The 1st Class stamp entitled Madonna and Child was from a painting by Austrian-born Marianne Stokes, 1855—1927, who was associated with the Newlyn School in Cornwall. The painting was done in the early 1900s in Ragusa on the Dalmatian coast overlooking the Adriatic Sea. The model was a local girl in traditional costume. The thorny vines in the background perhaps presage the crucifixion and may explain the melancholy shown on Mary's face. Stokes preferred a Pre-Raphaelite style.

The 42p stamp entitled Virgin Mary with the Infant Christ was from a European school color lithograph done around 1900. The artist is unknown. The 62p stamp entitled Choctaw Virgin Mother and Child features Native American figures painted in the style of an Orthodox icon. The artist is Father John B. Giuliani, an American priest well-known for his Native American Madonna series. The 68p stamp entitled Madonna and the Infant Jesus was derived from a Mughal painting circa 1620—1630 AD. This style reflects the Indo-Islamic-Persian influence that dominated much of the Indian subcontinent from the 16th to the 19th century. Although many images have male figures at the periphery, this is one of the few that has interposed a male (presumably Joseph) between the mother and child. The £1.12 stamp entitled Come Let Us Adore Him was from a painting with colored sand by Dianne Tchumet, an Australian Aboriginal artist. The style of the art focuses attention on the adult figures while the infant remains completely undefined as a black form. The first day of issue of the 2005 Madonna and Child stamps was November 1st.

The Special Postmarks. A large number of special first day postmarks were issued by the Royal Mail. Examples are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Special First Day Postmarks (PM) Used for the 2005 Royal Mail Christmas Issue

						
Official Bureau PM	Official Bethlehem PM	Official non-pictorial Bethlehem PM in Welsh and English	Madonna and Child, York	Madonna and Child, Christchurch Newport	Madonna and Child, Holytown, Motherwell	Angel,1300 Years of Christian Worship, Wells, Somerset
						
Shepherds, Shepherdswell, Dover	Merry Christmas from York Minster	Christmas, Canterbury	St. Katharine's Way, London E1	Annunciation Maryhill, Isle of Lewis	Merry Christmas to All, North Pole, London W10	Nativity, Stableford, Newcastle
Madonna and Child, Bethlehem, Llandeilo	Christmas 2005, Bethlehem, Llandeilo	Madonna and Child, Mary Street, Birmingham	Mary and Joseph, Bethlehem, Llandeilo	Magi, Wisemans Bridge, Narberth	Crown, Bethlehem, Llandeilo	Royal Mail Christmas Stamps, Wolverhampton Art Gallery*

*Location of original painting on 1st class stamp.

Locations were throughout the British Isles with an emphasis on names associated with the Nativity. Bethlehem, Llandeilo issued at least six different postmarks. This small Welsh town of approximately 2,000 inhabitants is located above the river Tywi, and is known for its special Christmas postmarks. Llandeilo

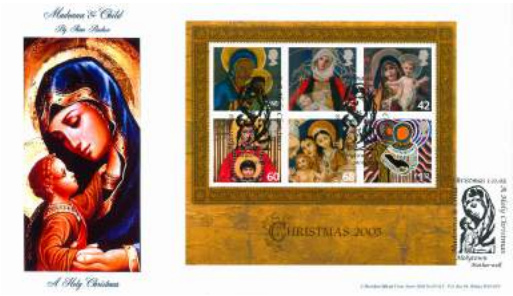
has been a holy place for as long as Christianity has been in Wales, and was one of the main centers for spread of Christianity throughout Wales. It derives its name from St. Teilo who was very involved in the Christian movement circa 550AD.

First Day Covers. Not to detract from the beauty of the six stamps, the official First Day Cover (FDC) of the Royal Mail has simple vines with silver embossing as the cachet (right). This one carries the pictorial Star of Bethlehem postmark from Bethlehem near Llandeilo.

Two well-known producers of FDCs since the late 1960s and early 1970s, Cotswold and Stuart, have now combined their efforts. Two FDCs by these makers feature a stylized Madonna and Child on the cachet. The cachet on the FDC franked with the individual stamps (left) seems to focus on the tenderness of the mother for the child. It carries the pictorial postmark of shepherds from Shepherdswell, near Dover in southeast England (Table 1). The FDC with the minisheet (below) shows the mother's head in this cachet more distant from that of the infant suggesting perhaps her awe of the event. This image was used for the special pictorial cancel from York

(Table 1). This particular FDC, however, carries the pictorial postmark of the Journey into Bethlehem from Bethlehem, Llandeilo (Table 1).

Sheridan Philatelic Covers also produced FDCs franked with the six separate stamps as well as with the minisheet. The cachet on the FDC with the minisheet (left) features a painting of the Madonna and Child by contemporary Bulgarian icon artist Ilian Rachov. This image was also used as the pictorial postmark on both FDCs from Holytown near Motherwell in Scotland (Table 1). The cachet on the FDC with the individual stamps features a Madonna and Child from a stained glass window (right).



An FDC produced by Chapman Mitchell Covers is shown below. The pictorial cancel shows the Bletchley Park Post Office. This mansion, 50 miles northwest of London, was used in World War II for the Government Code and Cypher School whose primary job it was to break German codes. After the war it became home to a variety of organizations including the Post Office. The all-over cachet depicts a snowy scene of people departing church.

Two FDCs were produced by Buckingham. The one franked with the individual stamps celebrates 1300 years of Christian worship at Wells Cathedral (left). Located near Bristol in southwest England, the city derived its name from five holy wells (springs) located behind the Cathedral. Construction of the Cathedral as it exists today began in 1180 and is the earliest example of Gothic architecture in England. The cachet features a view of the Cathedral in the background with an angel blowing a horn—the same image used on the postmark. This particular FDC has been signed by the Bishop of Bath and Wales, Peter Bryan Price. The Buckingham cover franked with the minisheet (right) features as its cachet the Madonna and Child from the central panel of a tryptich by Florentine painter Fra Angelico (c. 1387-1455). He was also a Dominican friar who was beatified by the Vatican in 1984. The Canterbury postmark represents the outline of the panel (Table 1).

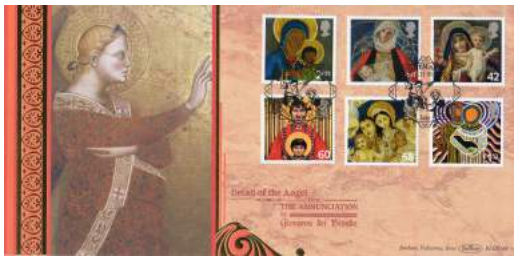
The Bradbury Sovereign Series Cover No. 63 is shown to the left. Its cachet is a lovely praying Madonna, and it has a Madonna and Child postmark from Mary Street, Birmingham (Table 1). Interestingly, it is franked with the minisheet to the left of the cachet. A. G. Bradbury has been

producing limited edition FDCs since 1980 and some have become highly collectible.

Benham has been making silk-cacheted FDCs since 1979. For the Christmas issues, these covers tend to be highly decorated, often with gilt. An example of one such FDC is shown to the right. The cachet consists of a silk insert surrounded by a 22 ct gilt frame of stars and nativity scenes. A painting entitled “A Shepherd of Jerusalem” by William J. Webbe, a British artist and book illustrator, is displayed on the insert. It is postmarked Shepherdswell, Dover (Table 1). A beautiful Mexican Madonna

adorns another FDC produced by Benham (left). It carries the Mary and Joseph pictorial postmark from Bethlehem, Llandeilo (Table 1).

Benham also produced two FDCs postmarked from Maryhill, Isle of Lewis, a Scottish Island (Table 1). The pictorial postmark represents the Annunciation—the announcement to Mary by the angel Gabriel, of her holy selection. The over-

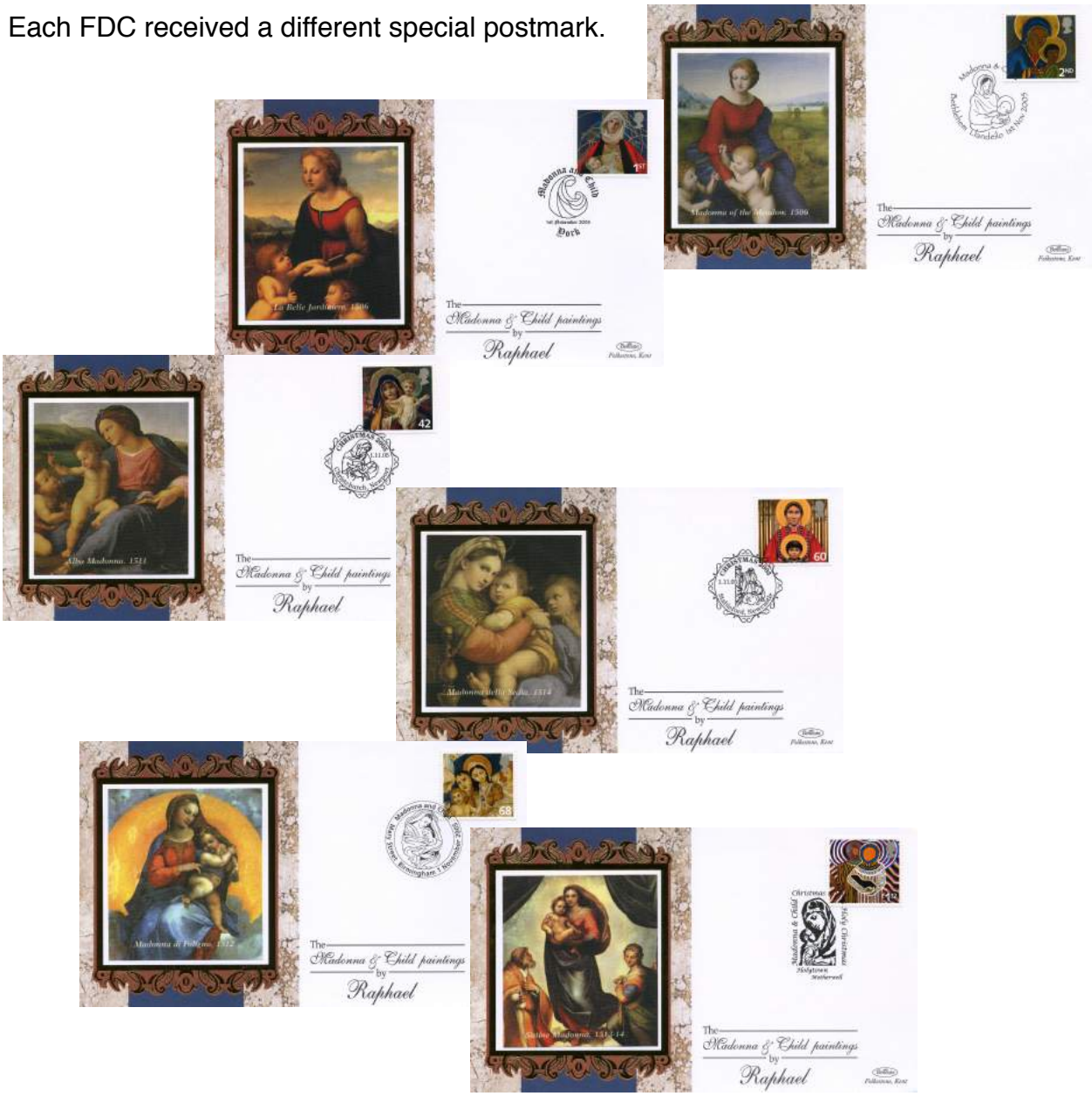


all cachet on the FDC franked with the individual stamps (left) shows the detail of Gabriel from a painting by Giovanni del Biondo and is decorated in gilt. The cachet on the FDC franked with the minisheet is a gilt-framed reproduction of the Virgin

Kazanskaya by 20th century Russian icon artist Dmitrii Smirnov (right).

A lovely series of FDCs with a single stamp from the 2005 Christmas Issue was produced by Benham, and featured different Madonna and Child paintings by Raphael. Every cachet was a silk insert surrounded by a gilt frame.

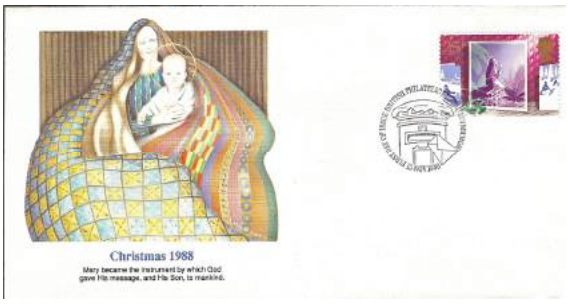
Each FDC received a different special postmark.



Madonna and Child on Cachets of Worldwide Covers

A great diversity of artistic styles, materials, and ethnicities are depicted on cachets of worldwide covers with the Mother and Child image. Use of color and form range from a simple, monochromatic outline (Cyprus 11-22-1971, right) to a Mother and Child image cloaked in complex, multicolored quilt-like patterns (Great Britain 11-15-1988, right);

and from astounding realism (Great Britain 11-20-1984, below)



to surrealistic images (Honduras 12-15-1994, below).

Cachet material ranges from silk (Grenada 11-18-1986, left), to metal (Jordan 12-21-1968, below), to specially woven textiles (Great Britain 11-25-1970, below).

Cachets also represent different artistic media used to depict the Madonna and Child image:

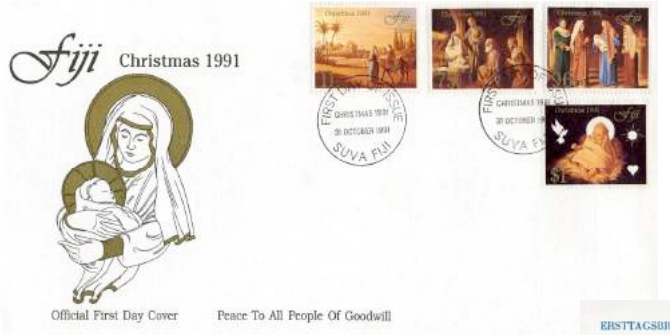
Austria 12-1-1972, from wood carving circa 1420-1430.

Great Britain 11-24-1976, English medieval embroidery, Virgin and Child, Clare Chasuble.

Artistic styles vary greatly on worldwide covers showing the Madonna and Child on their cachet.

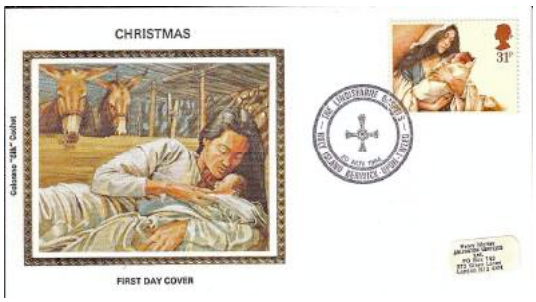
Australia 11-1-2002

Cocos (Keeling) Islands 11-31-1983



Fiji 10-31-1991

West Berlin 11-9-1973



Great Britain 11-20-1984

Grenadines of St. Vincent 11-20-1975

Guyana 10-18-1972

Jersey 11-7-2000

Liechtenstein 12-7-1972, Autographed by Walter Kent, composer of “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” with first bars drawn on cover.

Malawi 11-26-1991

Malta 12-9-1972

Norfolk Island 11-11-1963

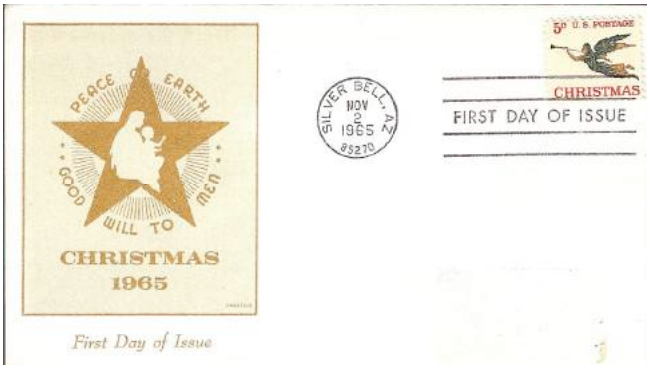
Philippines 12-15-1986

Romania 12-2-2005

Spain 11-4-1975

Sri Lanka 12-8-1994

United States 11-2-1965



United States 10-14-1975

A variety of ethnicities and Christmas traditions can also be seen across the different countries of origin.

Unused Aerogramme
from Barbados

Belgium 12-7-1968

Botswana 12-3-1973

Canada 11-15-1968

Gilbert & Ellice Islands 10-20-1969

Kiribati 12-2-1991

Malta 11-3-1964

Micronesia 11-16-1987

Samoa 10-15-1973

Senegal 12-24-1987

St. Kitts 11-7-1983

Suriname 11-3-1999

From this brief snapshot of Madonna and Child adorned covers, it is easy to see how this image is considered to be one of the hallmark icons of Christmas worldwide. Its acceptance by and incorporation into many distinct cultures, countries, ethnicities and traditions, is proof of the universality of the message revealed by the image.

Acknowledgements

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Resources

1. Bloy, Wilmer. Christmas Stamp Stories: The England Madonnas for 2005. Yule Log, Jan./Feb. p.8, 2006.